

Sermon, Epiphany 2C, January 20, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it.” (John 2:7-8)

The story we hear today in our Gospel reading for the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany is wonderful, compelling, and memorable because it describes a wedding celebration where Jesus performs his first public miracle. It is the sort of story that lends itself to all kinds of fun Sunday School projects. This story came up last year in the Sunday School curriculum we were using. During our family liturgy, instead of a formal sermon, I had a conversation with the kids about the story. I asked them about this miracle, that, yes, it was amazing that Jesus had turned water into wine. Yet, what sort of wine was it? We hear the steward say that the bridegroom has kept the “good” wine until last. One forthright ten-year-old raised his hand and said, “It was *French* wine!” (And I mused to myself, “How does this child know the difference?”)

However, what actually takes place is rather mysterious; the conversation between Jesus and his mother is cryptic at best; and only the disciples seem to realize that a miracle has even taken place. The steward is merely amazed that the bridegroom has saved the best for last. Wine is spoken of only twice in the Gospel of John. Not only that, but the appearance of wine seems to bookend this particular Gospel. It shows up near the beginning of John as we hear today. Then at the end

of John, when Jesus is hanging on the cross, Jesus is offered sour wine. When he receives it, he says, “It is finished.” (John 19:29-30).

The narrative of the Last Supper, when Jesus says, “This is my body..., this is my blood...,” has so infused our Eucharistic liturgy, I find this fact startling and worth thinking about. Jesus’ final gathering with the disciples on John is the foot washing, not a depiction of the Last Supper—albeit it probably takes place before a meal. Mary, too, is mentioned just twice in this Gospel (and not by name): here at the wedding feast of Cana, and then at the foot of the cross when Jesus puts her into the care of the Beloved Disciple.

The scene opens with Jesus, Mary, and the disciples attending a wedding as guests. (In Jesus’ time wedding celebrations would have lasted for several days). Let us imagine that we, too, are guests. We learn that the wine has run out: a serious lapse of hospitality on the part of the bridegroom! Then we hear this rather curious exchange between Jesus’ mother and Jesus. Jesus’s mother says, “They have no wine.” Jesus answers her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” As laconic as this conversation sounds, I believe it is between two people who understand each other. Both Mary and Jesus have a deep inner knowing of what Jesus’ “hour” entails. When Mary says, “They have no wine,” I hear an insightful, prophetic statement. What is needed is not just enough wine to drink at that particular celebration, but Jesus himself. Perhaps Jesus

realizes that there is much work to be done before traveling to Jerusalem, so he gives the answer he gives.

Yet Mary knows her son's essential nature. She says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." (This is the woman, after all, who, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, tells the angel Gabriel, "'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" (Luke 1:38) Surely that would command respect with the servants)! There just happen to be six large stone jars nearby, each capable of holding twenty or thirty gallons of liquid. Jesus gives the servants two simple tasks: fill the jars with water, then draw some out again. In this day of CGI special effects, this isn't the way we want our miracles to happen is it? As a matter of fact, the task for the servants of filling those jars would have been a lot of work—especially if they had to carry water from a well. Jesus doesn't say anything profound. He doesn't even seem to touch the jars of water. Yet when the water is drawn out again, it has become wine. It is not just any wine, but the best vintage that can be had.

At the end of today's Gospel, the writer tells us that this is the first of Jesus' signs. It is a sign that reveals God's glory such that the disciples "believed in him." What is the nature of God's glory in this sign? Is it the mere fact of a miracle taking place? A wise teacher of mine told me once that a spiritual seeker should not go looking for miracles. They certainly manifest to us—every day if we are

looking. Miracles are not magic or sleight of hand; they are evidence of the presence of God in the world. We do not actually see or hear Jesus do anything in this miracle; it is hidden until the wine is drawn out. And maybe what is most important for us: we participate.

Along with the servants, we are invited show our faith by filling those jars. It can be as simple as going about our daily lives, yet with care and attention. I know for a certainty that it happens in prayer. I love the small detail in our story that the servants fill the jars to the brim. They do not stint. Jesus does not tell them the outcome of their filling the jars. He simply says, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward...” (John 2:8) Obediently, they take it. On this cold, snowy winter day, maybe we can contemplate what it might mean in our own lives to fill those jars with water, and then draw it out again, offering it to the chief steward for an abundant, celebratory banquet. Somewhere along the way, a miracle may occur.

A good friend of mine who is a primary care physician recently told me this story. “I work at an opiate addiction clinic a couple times a month where I run a group. Yesterday I tried to get the group to talk about relapse prevention. One young woman said nothing the entire time. I ended as I usually do with a mindfulness exercise during which I said, “Think of a word that describes how you feel right now.” Some people shared their word after the mindfulness meditation, and I encouraged them to invoke the word in the coming months when they are

feeling stressed. After everyone left the one young woman stayed behind. "Are you ok?" I asked. She said, "Yes, I just hate talking in public, so I'm scared of coming to this group. But I wanted you to know... that my word... was 'peaceful'." And then she left." Whose jar was filled? What wine was drawn out?

Throughout Scripture we hear that it is in God's nature to create abundance in places that do not seem to support it. It is as if God *must* do this. God pours out God's self continually to give life to us and all of Creation. As it says in our Psalm today: "They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life..." (Psalm 36:8-9)

This is the glory that the disciples see. This is what convinces them. This is their Epiphany.

"...Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice, which on the cross a pike
Did set again abroach, then let him say
If ever he did taste the like.
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine."

From *Agonie* by George Herbert

(*Abroach* means to tap a wine cask)